



Illustrating 'First Books'

—SIGRUN SRIVASTAVA

"Why buy books for him?" asked a father, looking down at his chubby two-year old offspring, giggling happily. "He can't even read."

Well, he can't read, but he can see, take in things, recognize, recollect, understand, associate words with images and store them in his mind. And what is more, he will learn to love books — to associate books with a feeling of pleasure.

Books, especially picture books, enlarge the understanding and the vision of children and quicken their imagination. And when can imagination, understanding and vision be better sharpened than during the earliest years of childhood!

Why Picture Books?

Children first learn by sound and sight, which in turn lead to the word and later to the abstract concept behind the word. This indicates the importance of pictures. They lead the child to the essentials in literature, the meaning of language! And since pictorial presentation of printed matter has a

greater impact and more lasting influence on the child's mind, there can be no better medium than the visual one.

Long before a child can read he gets attracted by pictures in books. These pictures arouse his curiosity and interest in books as well as in the world around him. During these most impressionable years the child should be exposed to nothing but the best of illustrations with the best of text. The early response to and the early involvement in books are responsible for the formation of reading habits and taste of a child and his later attitude towards art and literature in general.

Through pictures in first books the child accumulates his first impressions, visions and ideas. They help him grasp and understand the mass of new experiences gained from day to day, help him to understand the new, strange world around him and himself, they lead the child towards the understanding of the more abstract concepts he will meet later on.

For the two-year-old child the world

around him is a strange place full of mysteries and often unpleasant adventures; giant-like people roar at him, frown down upon him from their towering height, huge ferocious creatures on four legs snarl and show their teeth! Everything is big and new and often frightening. Only a few things around him are warm and friendly: mother, father, the milk bottle, a spoon, his bed, a ball and a banana, yummy and sweet.

It's the artist's responsibility through his images to help the child to understand the world around him, and find his place in it.

The neighbour's dog looks from out of the book page, he doesn't snarl; he smiles, and his eyes are big and friendly. He isn't that frightful anymore, so the child can hold him in his own hands.

First books for children are profusely illustrated nursery-rhymes, poems and simple story books and concept books, ABC number, shape and colour books.

They flash back images of familiar things. The child is thrilled to recognize well-known objects. Therefore, the illustrator should choose objects that relate to the child's experience and his environment. The child should be able to identify shapes easily. Illustrations should show in a sympathetic way the children's family, his friend. The adventure of the lost rabbit, the pleasures of his birthday party, the first monsoon. In these images from an illustrator's brush, the child learns new ways, of seeing things and to see more things in different ways. These books not only expand his visual knowledge, they also fire his imagination.

Looking at pictures in a book is a thrilling experience for a child. But it can be so only if the right material is given to him at the right time. A child at that age will be hardly in a position to understand and enjoy the small realistic or abstract pen sketches in black and white in books for



teenagers, nor would he respond positively to detailed illustrations of picture books that may invite his sister, only a few years older, to ponder over for hours on end.

What Should Picture Books Show?

In order to speak to a child the illustrator has to tune himself to the child's mind and the child's stage of maturity. The artist must primarily keep the child's interest heart and not his own artistic achievement. The pictures in books for the very young have to be simple, direct and recognisable to the reader. A certain degree of stylisation helps to create shapes to which a child responds instantly. One thought or one shape at a time should be shown clearly without distortion, in large, bold pictures without too much detail.

Since the child's span of concentration is very short, the book should have only eight to sixteen pages. And of course the book should be bright and colourful. For it is colour a child reacts to earliest in life.

A slight stylisation is most suited for the presentation of pictures for very young children; however, the stylisation should not be carried to an extreme, where it dis-

torts the picture, or bewilders the child.

A slight humanisation in animals, the rendering of emotional expressions on the faces of animals and birds is permissible and delights the child. However it should just serve as a medium to create a world a child is invited to enter and feel at home in. Illustrations should radiate a feeling of warmth, understanding and affection. People, animals and other things should not show expressions of violence, terror, cruelties that would frighten a child.

The artist should be sure that the father and mother image he creates is a sympathetic one. He should show an intact world and characters that radiate a feeling of love and understanding. The illustrations should evoke feelings of security, happiness and satisfaction.

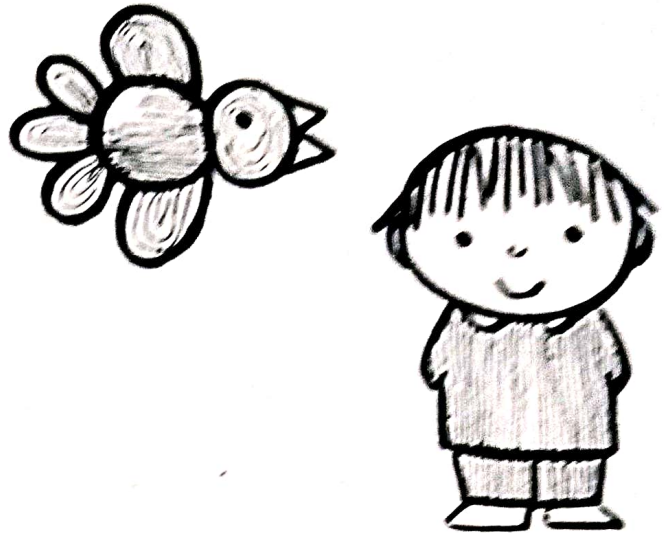
Techniques of Illustration, Line Drawings :

Since the early drawings of a child consist only of lines the child seems to grasp the pictorial convention line earlier than any other presentation. In the pictures for the very young this line could be delicate, as in the delightful book by Manjula Padmanabhan "The Rainbow" (National Book Trust).

These beautiful pictures, ablaze with colour, truly enhance the text of the book.

Another good example of simple line drawing filled in with solid colours is the Sunflower ABC Book and My Body designed by Pinaki (Thomson Press).

A genius in illustrating first books is Dick Bruna. He introduces very familiar objects of a child's limited experience, for example a spoon, a doll, etc, one of each page. The thick black outlines of the highly simplified shapes are then filled with bright colours set against a contrasting background. The size of the books is small and handy.



A similar technique has been adopted by Inder Gajjar in the *Bunny Book* series of colouring books (Frank Bros.) The thick-outlined illustrations are clear, without unnecessary details. They are humorous and appeal instantly to the child.

Collage

Another excellent medium of illustrating these early books is collage. Large simplified shapes of well-known objects, cut out in paper or cloth, set against a background of contrasting colours are bound to attract the young child's eyes and fancy. Materials such as wool, beads, lace and other natural materials give these illustrations life and offer unlimited variety for the artist to work with. Examples of this technique are the *ABC Book* (Thomson Press), *I know many animals* and *I know many people*, all designed by Sigrun Srivastava.

In *The Friends* (Children's Book Trust), Pulak Biswas demonstrates how attractive collage can be when handled in not more than two colours. However this book would appeal more to slightly older children.

Shekhar's technique as seen in the delightful *Animal ABC* (Roli Books International) is unique and imaginative. It is a mixed techniques with opaque colours,



where finger paints have been used effectively as an additional texture, that adds life and charm to the illustrations.

Photographs

In India photography as a medium of illustration has not been exploited. However the West has produced a wide variety of children's books with excellent photos and Frobelkan books from Japan (available in India) offer a range of delightful first books. The lovable animated dolls and animals in simple action have won the hearts of many children. The colour reproduction is superb, the washable pages add to the popularity of these books.

Book design

The book is a unity of text and illustration, and can only be successful if both are a harmonious unit. Since picture and text influence each other they should be compatible. So the illustrator (designer) must choose the right size and type of letters. Type face and size are chosen in the right proportion to the style and size of the illustration and its layout.

For a long time Sarif faces were being used in India. However, this type face is rather difficult for a child to recognize and, later, to copy. The letter "G", for example, is different from the one in the child's first writing books. The sans serif types Univers and Helvetia, printed in bold and 24 to 30 point type, are ideal for first books.

The young illustrator who enters this field should be sure that he loves what he does, that he loves and understands children and feels comfortable in their special world. He should feel a certain attraction towards children and their books and the strong urge to contribute this field as well as a firm belief that he has something to give. For those who seek success and money the field of children's book illustration is certainly not the right place. For the remuneration, especially in India, stands in no comparison to the time and talent the artist invests in this task.

The gift of writing and specially illustrating first books is given to very few. A certain competence can be acquired, however, by genuine effort and an aptitude built up. The experience accumulated over a period of time will enable the artist to create books that will speak to children, books that will be loved, cherished and remembered for a lifetime.